

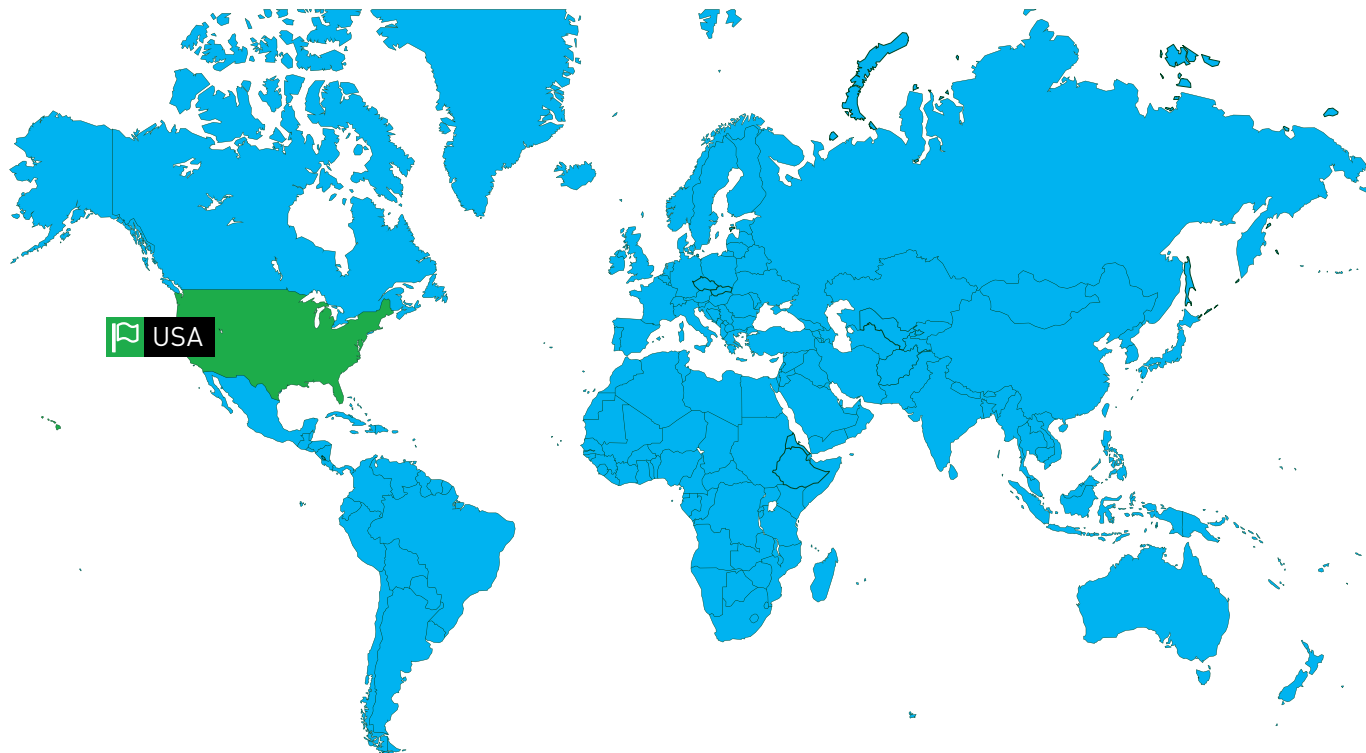


choice
TRAVEL

Destination Guide: The USA

What to know before you go
Essential preparation and planning tips
Accommodation and transport

CONTENTS



2 What you need to know

- 2 Travel-size tips
- 2 Know before you go
- 2 Best time to go
- 3 Culture
- 3 Health and safety
- 4 Laws and watchouts
- 5 Making a complaint
- 5 Emergency contacts

6 What you need to do

- 6 Visas and passports
- 7 Vaccinations
- 7 Phone and internet

- 8 Power plugs
- 8 Money
- 9 Travel insurance
- 10 Handy links and apps

11 Accommodation and transport

- 11 Flights
- 11 At the airport (and getting to your hotel)
- 14 Key destinations and their airports
- 14 Getting around
- 16 Driving in the USA
- 17 Accommodation and tours

Who is CHOICE? Set up by consumers for consumers, **CHOICE** is the [consumer advocate](#) that provides Australians with information and advice, free from commercial bias.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

OVERVIEW

Best time to go, culture, language, health, safety, laws, watchouts, emergency contacts and more.

Travel-size tips

- › Most Australians don't need a visa to visit the USA, just an [ESTA](#) (Electronic System for Travel Authorization).
- › [Flying to the USA](#) can take anywhere from 10 hours (to Hawaii) to more than 20 hours (to New York).
- › The USA is a big place. It takes at least three days to [travel](#) by car or train from one side to the other – or about six hours in a plane.
- › [Sales tax](#) is often not included in advertised prices for accommodation, events, meals and goods – always check what the final price will be.

Know before you go

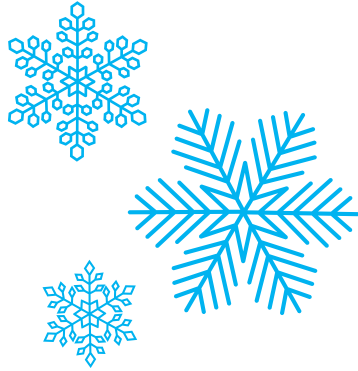
- › US Customs and Border Protection is notoriously strict. Make sure you know [all the rules](#) before you go – tourists have been turned away at US borders for even minor infractions.
- › The cost of medical care in the United States is extremely high. [Travel insurance](#) is a must.

Best time to go

America is a big place, so the weather can vary from sub-zero blizzards during winter to baking hot heatwaves during summer. Check the [average temperature and rainfall](#) by month and state based on when and where you're planning to travel.

- › If you're hoping for a white Christmas, New York often delivers. The city also delivers some serious heatwaves and humidity during summer.
- › Los Angeles, and the rest of California, enjoys a more temperate climate year-round with a dry but intense heat in summer.
- › Extreme winter weather in the north of the country, including in New York, Boston and Washington DC, can sometimes disrupt travel.
- › Peak holiday periods include Independence Day on July 4, Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November, and Christmas.
- › The summer school holidays usually span July and September; [exact dates](#) change each year.

- › Summer is the high season for much of the country, but it's hurricane season (peaking from August to October) for the Gulf Coast, which includes Miami, New Orleans and Walt Disney World in Orlando.
- › Winter is Hawaii's peak season, but the islands are also busy during mid-summer. Since Hawaii enjoys year-round warm temperatures, the shoulder seasons are a great time to grab a bargain.
- › Autumn (or 'fall') is the time to visit areas famous for their foliage, such as Vermont and New England. The [farmer's almanac](#) lists the peak fall foliage dates for 48 states.
- › The ski season generally begins in November, with many resorts first opening their doors for business on the Thanksgiving long weekend. Peak ski times are during January and February, but many resorts stay open until April, when prices may drop for the shoulder season.



Culture

American culture and language is similar to Australia's, with only a few differences.

- › Tipping is expected. Remember that the minimum wage in the US is far lower than in Australia and many workers rely on tips to make ends meet. As a general guide, tip taxi drivers, restaurant staff and other servers 10–20%. Porters, valets and hotel maids should receive up to a few dollars.
- › Some restaurants automatically add 'gratuities' or

'service charges' to the bill, particularly in tourist areas or when serving large groups. In these cases it's up to you whether you want to add more to the tip.

- › Sales tax may come as a surprise, as it's often not included in advertised prices.
- › The US still operates on the imperial measurement system, which means you'll need to do the 'math' to translate miles into kilometres and gallons into litres. Better yet, use [an app](#).
- › There are a few minor language differences; for example it's better to ask for a 'restroom' than a 'toilet', and an order of a 'flat white' will most likely earn you a blank stare (although Starbucks has recently introduced the Aussie brew to the mainstream). See this [Australian-American dictionary](#) for more examples.



Health and safety

The US health care system has no reciprocal deals with Australia, which means if you get sick, you'll have to pay your own bills. And boy, can those hospital bills skyrocket! Think \$20,000 for a broken arm or \$55,000 for an appendectomy. The quality of care is as good as Australia's, but it goes without saying that you'll need good [travel insurance](#) to cover the cost.

Warning: If you can't prove that you have insurance, hospitals may charge you upfront.

For the latest advice on risks, including terrorism, natural disasters and potential outbreaks of disease, visit smartraveller.gov.au.

[Do I need vaccinations to travel to the USA? > Page 7](#)

Tip: Have you registered your travel plans with smartraveller.gov.au and checked the latest safety advice on the region you're travelling to?



Laws and watchouts

Laws

- 21 is the legal drinking age in the USA, although there are some variations in [state laws](#).
- Penalties for drug possession are severe, but marijuana use has been legalised in some states.
- Some Australian medications may be illegal in the USA, particularly if they're not approved by the US [Food and Drug Administration](#). Check the [US embassy's advice](#) if you're concerned.
- Laws can vary greatly from state to state, including those for [driving](#), [smoking in public places](#), [gay marriage](#), [gambling](#) and [marijuana use](#).

For road rules, see [Driving in the USA > Page 16](#).

Watchouts

The USA is generally a safe place to visit, but risks can vary depending on where

you are and what you're doing.

- America's violent crime rate is much higher than Australia's, and risks of muggings can be higher in certain neighbourhoods. Check with locals or hotel staff to find out if there are areas of some cities that you should avoid.
- Keep your belongings close, as pickpockets and bag-snatchers may operate in crowded areas.
- Bank card skimming and credit card fraud is a problem in the USA, as it is in Australia. Keep an eye on your statements and let the bank know if you see any unexplained transactions.
- Be careful using free Wi-Fi hotspots. Follow [these tips](#) to keep your device safe from hackers, and avoid logging in to internet banking on untrusted connections.

See our list of [tourist traps](#) for more advice on avoiding common scams while on holiday.



Making a complaint

If you fall victim to theft, call the police by dialing 911. The US has similar consumer protection laws to Australia. If you have a dispute with an accommodation, transport or tour provider, or any other local service, follow the guidelines at [usa.gov](https://www.usa.gov) for making complaints and resolving problems. If your gripe is with an Australian tour operator, airline, or booking site, see choice.com.au for the [usual procedures](#) for making a complaint or seeking compensation.

Emergency contacts

Emergency number: 911

Australian Embassy usa.embassy.gov.au

1601 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest Washington
DC 20036, United States
+1 202 797 3000

24-hour emergency number: +1 888 239 3501

Facebook: [AustraliaInTheUS](#)

Twitter: [@AusAmbUSA](#)

Australian Consulates-General

New York: 150 East 42nd Street, 34th Floor, New York, NY, +1 212 351 6500

Los Angeles: 2029 Century Park East, Suite 3150, Los Angeles, CA +1 310 229 2300

San Francisco: 575 Market Street, San Francisco, CA +1 415 644 3620

Honolulu: 1000 Bishop Street, Penthouse, Honolulu, HI, +1 808 529 8100

Chicago: 123 North Wacker Drive, Suite 1330, Chicago, IL, +1 312 419 1480

Houston: 4623 Feagan Street, Houston, TX, +1 713 782 6009

Denver: 9200 West Cross Drive, Suite 1100, Littleton, CO, +1 303 321 2234

Atlanta: Atlanta Financial Center, 3353 Peachtree Road, NE, Suite 1140, Atlanta, GA, +1 404 760 3400

24-hour Australian Consular Emergency Centre: +61 2 6261 3305 (from overseas) or 1300 555 135 (within Australia) or SMS +61 421 269 080



WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Visas, vaccinations, phone roaming, SIM cards, internet, power adapters, money, travel insurance, handy apps and more.

Visas and passports

Australia is a participant country of the USA's [VWP](#) (Visa Waiver Program), meaning that Australian passport holders can visit the USA for tourism or business for 90 days or less without a visa, provided they meet the eligibility requirements.

This doesn't mean Aussies can just show up at the airport empty-handed though. Eligible travellers must have a valid [ESTA](#) (Electronic System for Travel Authorization). The only way to apply for an ESTA is via the US government website esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta. Approval is usually immediate, but it's recommended you apply as early as possible (at least 72 hours before you depart) in case your application is rejected for some reason.

You will be asked questions about your physical and mental health and your criminal history. If you're unsure of how to answer, check this advice from tourismlegal.com.au. If your ESTA application is rejected you will need to apply for a formal visa through the [US embassy](#).

Keep a copy of your application number or print out your approval notice. You won't need this at customs, but some airlines may ask to see it.

Tip: Get your ESTA or visa sorted out *before* you pay for your flights and accommodation.

Your ESTA is valid for multiple trips over two years, so there's no harm in applying for it well in advance of your trip.

Scam alert: A number of websites and email scams have sprung up offering to arrange ESTA applications for a fee. Some even pose as official US government sites. The only place you need to go to apply for an ESTA is the official website: esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta and the fee should be \$US14.

Visa/ESTA rules and prices may change. For up-to-date information check the US embassy website: canberra.usembassy.gov.

Vaccinations

Specific vaccinations are generally unnecessary for travel to the US, however traveldoctor.com.au recommends you make sure your [routine vaccinations](#) are up to date. The risk of contracting a dangerous disease in the USA is comparable to the risk in Australia. Check the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov) if you're concerned about outbreaks.

[More about health and safety in the USA > Page 3](#)

Phone and internet

Global roaming and coverage

Australian mobile phones will only work on some US networks. Most Australian handsets operate on a GSM standard, whereas the US operates on GSM and CDMA. This means your coverage may be patchy as your phone will only work in areas serviced by GSM networks.

If you use your Australian SIM while in the US, you're likely to see some pretty enormous bills. Check with your telco for roaming prices:

➤ [Telstra](#)

➤ [Vodafone](#)

➤ [Optus](#)

➤ [Virgin](#)

Tip: Switch off data roaming on your phone before you leave Australia. Likewise, switch off your voicemail and ask friends and family to text you rather than calling (you'll be charged if you answer incoming calls).

Local SIM

Using a US SIM is a cheaper option, but remember your phone will need to be unlocked. Your GSM Australian handset won't work on the CDMA Verizon or Sprint/Nextel networks. You should have more luck with AT&T or T-Mobile, provided your handset operates at the right frequency. Check the [WhistleOut guide](#) for more information on phone/network compatibility. US mobile phone stores sell pre-paid SIMs, but some may not be willing to sell you a SIM without a handset. Your best bet is to buy a SIM online before you leave Australia.

Travel SIM

Pre-paid travel SIMs can be bought from some Australian travel stores, phone stores and post offices, or ordered online before you leave Australia.

Remember: Your phone will need to be unlocked to accept a SIM from another network.

Disposable phones

Disposable phones cost as little as \$US9 from US stores such as Walmart, K-Mart, Target or Best Buy. They come pre-loaded with credit and ready to go, but will do little more than make phone calls. Many won't even send text messages.



Tip: US mobile users pay for incoming calls and texts, as well as outgoing ones.

[Beat global roaming bill shock](#) – our guide to unlocking your phone and changing your global roaming settings.

Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi should be easy to find in cafes, hotels, libraries and even some parks. McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks all offer free Wi-Fi, but if you'd rather not compromise your waistline just for a hotspot, try searching on [wififreespot.com](#) or [wificafespots.com](#), or download an app such as [wefi](#) (Android or PC) or Wi-Fi Finder ([Apple](#) or [Android](#)).

Power plugs

Standard voltage: 120V

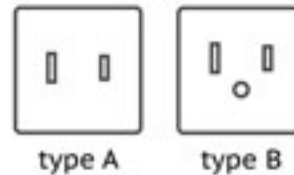
Frequency: 60Hz

US sockets have a lower voltage than Australia's 230V and a higher frequency than Australia's 50Hz. Most electrical appliances, such as laptops and phones, are designed to work on multiple voltages and frequencies, but it's always best to check. If your appliance or charger is marked 100-240V, 50/60 Hz then it will work in the US. Gadgets without a variable voltage or frequency should never be used on 120V or 60Hz. In the best case they simply won't work, in the worst they'll overheat and catch fire (the same warning applies to electrical goods bought in the US and brought back to Australia). A transformer can solve that problem, but it's quite a bulky item to travel with. Instead, consider buying a cheap appliance once you're over there.

Power sockets

America's power sockets and plugs are different to Australia's, so you'll need an adapter. If you're

concerned about your appliances being incompatible with US voltage, you could buy a combined adapter/transformer.



Money

Currency: US dollar (\$)

Check [xe.com](#) for the latest exchange rates.



Important: Tell

your bank about your travel plans two weeks before you leave. Card activity in a foreign country could be mistaken for fraud and you could find your account frozen.

Credit cards and ATMs

ATMs are readily available in towns and cities.

Remember that you'll be charged a foreign exchange fee and a withdrawal fee for every transaction – which can add up to as much as \$20.

Tip: Westpac customers can avoid withdrawal fees by using Bank of America ATMs, since both banks are part of the [Global ATM Alliance](#).

Credit cards are widely accepted, but remember most will charge a conversion fee of 2–3% every time you make an overseas purchase. Ask your bank about a traveller's card with no, or low, fees.

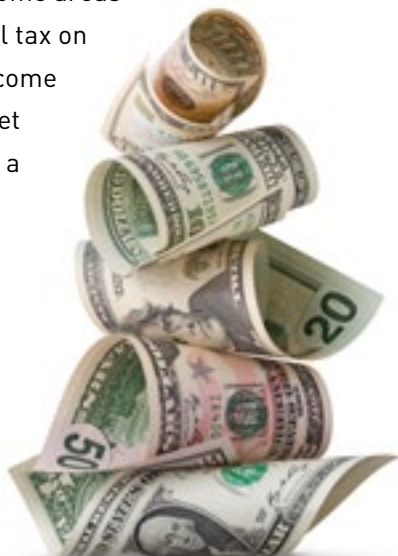
Money changers

You can buy US dollars from many Australian banks before you leave the country, or change Australian dollars at some US banks. Currency exchange outlets will be dotted around in tourist areas and at airports. Avoid changing money at the airport – it's unlikely you'll get the best rate.

Travellers' cheques aren't so common these days, but some US banks and retailers will still cash them. American Express has a redemption [location finder](#). If you're concerned about money security you could consider a pre-paid travel money card, which works in a similar way to a traveller's cheque but can also be used like a credit or debit card. For more advice, see our [travel money guide](#).

Tip: Carry at least two credit/debit cards and more than one currency (Australian and US). Split your money and cards between separate bags. That way if you lose one, you have a back-up.

Sales tax [varies](#) from state to state, and often won't be included on the price tag. You may be charged more than you expected for meals, clothing, electronics, services and more. There's no sales tax on petrol (fuel taxes are included in the price), and generally none on supermarket foods. Some areas charge an additional local tax on alcohol, which may also come as a surprise when you get the bill. You cannot claim a refund on sales tax when leaving the country – the way travellers to Australia can claim back GST – except in the case of [certain purchases](#) made in the state of Louisiana.



Tipping is customary in the US. Assume 10–20% for restaurant staff, hairdressers, beauticians, taxi drivers etc, and up to a few dollars for porters, valets and hotel maids. Some restaurants automatically add 'gratuities' or 'service charges' to the bill, particularly in tourist areas or when serving large groups. In these cases it's up to you whether you want to add more to the tip.

Travel insurance

Travel insurance is essential – particularly for travel to the USA where the cost of medical care could financially cripple you. Buy insurance at the same time as you book your trip, that way you'll be covered if you have to cancel for some reason before you go.

To choose the best cover, see CHOICE's [travel insurance reviews and comparisons](#).

Check the small print on your travel insurance policy for common exclusions, including sports such as skiing, rock climbing and sky diving, pre-existing medical conditions, and anything that happens to you while [under the influence](#) of drugs or alcohol.

Tips:

- Keep a print-out of your travel insurance details with you at all times while on your trip.
- Share your insurance details with family or friends before you leave.



Handy links and apps

Consider adding these links and apps to your phone, tablet or laptop before you go.

Tip: If possible, choose apps that work offline so they won't chew up your mobile data or stop working when you're in remote places.

- [City Guide](#) apps include maps and self-guided tours of popular destinations. They work offline, so they won't use up your mobile data.
- [Currency conversion apps](#) help you work out costs in Australian dollars.
- [Unit conversion apps](#) translate imperial measurements into metric.
- Search for free Wi-Fi hotspots on [wififreespot.com](#) or [wificafespots.com](#), or download an app such as [wefi](#) (Android or PC) or Wi-Fi Finder ([Apple](#) or [Android](#)).

Tip: To save a map onto your mobile device for offline use, select the area on Google Maps then select 'Save

offline map' from the menu and follow the directions on the screen. Your GPS positioning will still work on the saved map, even when you don't have access to the internet. Alternatively, download the Google Maps app, go to 'Offline maps' in the menu and select a city.

Websites

- [discoveramerica.com](#) (America's official tourism website)
- [canberra.usembassy.gov](#) (Australia's US embassy)
- [smartraveller.gov.au](#) for the Australian government's latest advice on the safety of the region you're travelling in.
- [lonelyplanet.com/usa](#)
- [unitedstates.tripadvisor.com](#)
- [virtualtourist.com](#)
- [expedia.com](#)
- [wikitravel.org/en/united_states_of_america](#) for crowd-sourced information on culture, travel tips and more (may not always be accurate).



ACCOMMODATION AND TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Flights to the USA, airport guides, key destinations, transport, car hire, accommodation, tours and more.

Flights

Flight time from Australia: 10+ hours to Hawaii / 14+ hours to Los Angeles / 20+ hours to New York

- The main airlines that fly directly between Australia and the USA are [Virgin Australia](#), [Qantas](#), [Air New Zealand](#), [United](#), [Delta](#), [Hawaiian Airlines](#) and [American Airlines](#).
- Direct flights are available from Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane to Los Angeles or Honolulu (Hawaii). United and Air New Zealand fly from Sydney to San Francisco. Qantas and American Airlines fly from Sydney to Dallas. There are no direct flights from Australia to New York.
- You can compare fares on airline booking sites such as [expedia.com](#), [skyscanner.net](#), [kayak.com](#) or with a travel agent. See our tips on [booking flights](#).

At the airport

- Most Australian passport holders won't need a visa to enter the USA, but you will need to have applied

for an Electronic System For Travel Authorization (ESTA) before arriving in the country.

- **Customs and immigration** can be a long and thorough process and travellers have been known to queue for as long as three hours upon arrival at some US airports.

Tip: If you're concerned about how long you may be queuing upon arrival (if you have a connecting flight to catch, for example), check [awt.cbp.gov](#) to get an idea of how long your wait time will be.

- Officials may question you about the length and purpose of your visit, places you've travelled to, your criminal history, and they may search your luggage for [prohibited or restricted items](#).

Tip: The TSA (Transport and Security Administration) won't think twice about breaking your suitcase lock to have a look inside. If you have a [TSA-compatible lock](#) it can be opened by security officers using a master key.

- Having a visa or ESTA is no guarantee that you'll be allowed into the United States. Some unlucky travellers have been turned around and sent home for infringements such as admitting to [past drug](#)

[use](#) or even for being [pregnant!](#)

- Honesty is always the best policy when it comes to your interactions with customs officials.
- You'll need to declare any medication you're carrying when you enter the country. Check the [US embassy's advice](#) if you're concerned. Medications that aren't approved by the US [Food and Drug Administration](#) may not be accepted.

Tip: No matter where you travel, you should carry all medications (even vitamins) in their original packaging, along with their original prescription. It's also a good idea to carry a letter from your doctor explaining what the medications are (using generic names), what they're for and dosage instructions.

- **Airport security** can be extremely thorough, meaning long queues when you depart the country, as well as when you arrive. Each airline and airport has different recommendations as to how early you should arrive to check in. Many recommend as much as three hours' leeway.

Tip: [MyTSA](#) allows you to check estimated security and post-security wait times for all major US airports.

- **Airport taxes** will be included in the cost of your air ticket, so you won't be charged an arrival or departure tax in cash at the airport, as is the case in some other countries.
- **Sales tax** cannot be refunded when leaving the US (unlike Australia's GST) except in the case of [certain purchases](#) made in the state of Louisiana.

Los Angeles International Airport (LAX)

- 30km south-west of downtown LA.
- LAX has nine passenger terminals connected by a U-shaped, two-level roadway. Curbside baggage check-in is available on the upper level (Departures). Baggage claim and buses/taxis are on the lower level (Arrivals).
- There is a taxi rank outside each terminal. Passengers are given a ticket listing typical fares to major destinations. There is a \$4 airport surcharge.
- Approximately [40 rental car companies](#) operate out of LAX. Many companies offer a courtesy shuttle to and from the parking area.
- [FlyAway](#) buses depart regularly from outside each terminal travelling to Van Nuys (San Fernando Valley), Union Station (Downtown LA), Westwood (West LA/UCLA), Santa Monica (1875 Main Street) and Hollywood (6244 Hollywood Blvd, at Argyle). No reservation is necessary.
- Courtesy [shuttle buses](#) run between the terminals and transport passengers to and from Parking Lot C and Aviation/LAX Metro Station.





- A train service runs from Aviation/LAX Station through the southern suburbs to Redondo Beach. To get to downtown LA, change to the Blue Line at Willowbrook Station.
- Bus services including [Culver City Bus Lines](#), [Santa Monica Big Blue Bus](#), and [Torrance Transit](#) run from the Metro Bus Center to a range of destinations.
- Airport website: [lawa.org](#).

New York - John F Kennedy International Airport (JFK)

- 24km southeast of central Manhattan.
- JFK has six passenger terminals.
- There is a taxi rank outside each terminal. Check the airport's [guide](#) to typical fares, including a flat rate for fares to Manhattan (currently \$US52). There is a \$3 airport surcharge, as well as a \$1 surcharge for peak times and a 50c tax for fares within New York (but not to New Jersey). The surcharges do not apply to the JFK to Manhattan flat-fare trip.
- Private cars, vans and limos can be booked ahead. The airport website has a [list of providers](#).

- There are [10 car hire companies](#) operating out of JFK. Service counters or courtesy phones can be found in the arrivals area.
- [AirTrain JFK](#) is a free 24-hour service connecting the airport's terminals with its car parks, hotel shuttle areas and car hire facilities. For a cost, it also connects with regular buses, New York's subway system and the Long Island Rail Road (which takes you directly to Penn Station, Manhattan in 35 minutes). Check the [airport website](#) for advice on connections, or plan your journey using New York's [MTA trip planner](#).
- Airport website: [panynj.gov](#).

Hawaii-Honolulu International Airport (HNL)

- 16km from Waikiki and 10km from Honolulu CBD.
- Honolulu Airport has an International Terminal, an Inter-island Terminal and a Commuter Terminal.
- A free shuttle bus operates between gates and terminals from 6am to 10pm.
- Six rental car companies have counters on the ground level opposite Baggage Claim G in the

International Terminal. Another four companies provide off-site rentals. See the [airport website](#) for details.

- There is a taxi rank outside the baggage claim area of each terminal. Fares are metered and include a baggage charge of 50c per bag.
- **SpeediShuttle** offers a door-to-door service directly to your hotel, office or home.
- City Buses arrive and depart from the airport approximately every 30 minutes. See the [airport website](#) for bus numbers, destinations, prices and baggage rules (there is a size limit on luggage).
- Airport website: hawaii.gov/hnl.

Getting around

Tip: Check if you need to pre-book any tickets.

Buses

Buses and coaches run between major cities and serve some rural areas.

Greyhound is the largest provider, covering all 48 states as well as Canada and Mexico. Tickets can be bought online, at bus stations, over the phone or at some convenience stores. Other providers include **Megabus**, which serves more than 100 cities, and **Coach USA**, which operates more than 20 local bus companies all over the US. If you're not sure which company to book with, try searching on gotobus.com.



Key destinations and their airports

New York City	John F. Kennedy International Airport	(JFK)
-	Newark Liberty International Airport	(EWR)
	LaGuardia Airport	(LGA)
Los Angeles (Hollywood, Malibu, Disneyland)	Los Angeles International Airport	(LAX)
(65km east of LA)	LA/Ontario International Airport	(ONT)
San Francisco	San Francisco International Airport	(SFO)
Dallas	Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport	(DFW)
Hawaii	Honolulu International Airport	(HNL)
Las Vegas	McCarran International Airport	(LAS)
-	North Las Vegas Airport	(VGT)
Florida	Miami International Airport	(MIA)
	Palm Beach International Airport	(PBI)
(27km to Walt Disney World)	Orlando International Airport	(MCO)

Trains

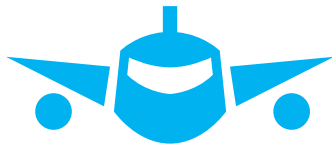
Trains connecting US cities are operated by [Amtrak](#). Tickets can be bought at stations or booked online. Bookings open 11 months in advance and the earlier you book the better price you'll get. Amtrak also offers [USA Rail Passes](#) for 15, 30 or 45 days. If you have the time, it's possible to cross the country by train, seeing a lot more than you would from a plane.



[The Man in Seat 61](#) lists a number of scenic cross-country options. Tailored train trips and packages can be booked via [internationalrail.com.au](#) or [railbookers.com.au](#).

Domestic flights

Flights are frequent and competitively priced. Major airlines include [American Airlines](#), [US Airways](#), [Virgin America](#) and [jetBlue](#). You can book via their websites, or compare fares and book using sites like [skyscanner.com](#) and [kayak.com](#).



Tip: [rome2rio.com](#) is a great resource for working out how to get from A to B by any means of transport, anywhere in the world.

Getting around towns and cities will depend on where you are. For example, New York has an excellent subway system, whereas LA is a very car-centric city with limited public transport. Metered taxis are common in all major towns and cities.

Public transport trip-planners by city

- New York: [mta.info](#)
- Los Angeles: [metro.net](#)
- San Francisco: [sfmta.com](#)
- Las Vegas: [rtcsonv.com](#)

- Honolulu: [thebus.org](#)

More at [publictransportation.org](#).

In more than half the states, the public transport info line is 511.

Car hire

Driving is arguably the best way to get around in the USA. Road trips are an American institution and a car or campervan will give you the freedom to explore at your own pace. [Avis](#), [Hertz](#), [Dollar](#) and [Alamo](#) are some of the major operators, but you may find cheaper rates with smaller players such as [Ace](#), [Advantage](#), [Fox](#), [Payless](#), and [Sixt](#). You can compare rental prices on travel booking sites such as [expedia.com](#) or on the dedicated car rental comparison and booking sites [vroomvroomvroom.com](#) and [autoslash.com](#) (Autoslash will also automatically search for discount coupons and special offers).



Tip: [Enterprise](#) rated highest in a [2014 US car hire satisfaction study](#).

Be on the lookout for hidden charges and taxes. Unexpected items on your bill could include fees for toll passes, GPS units, child seats, one-way drop-offs, late drop-offs, alleged damage to the vehicle and grossly inflated petrol costs. Even more baffling charges could come under the headings "concession fees", "facility charges" or "convenience fees". Some may be valid, but ask the company to disclose and explain them in full. See our guide to car hire for more advice.

Airport rentals will almost always be significantly pricier. Compare airport rates with nearby locations. You can often hire the car off-site and then drop it off at the airport at the end of your holiday.

Before you sign up for all the insurance extras that the

rental company will inevitably try to sell you, check to see what's already covered by your travel insurance. Some credit card programs also offer car rental cover. CHOICE's US sister organisation, Consumer Reports, has produced a comprehensive [guide to summer road travel](#) which includes [saving big bucks on car rentals](#), [finding the cheapest gas](#) and tips for a [stress-free road trip with kids](#).

Tip: Most companies will only rent to drivers aged over 21 who have held a licence for more than a year. Some may have a maximum age limit, or they may charge a young/senior driver surcharge.

Tip: [Check the law](#) in the state(s) you'll be visiting to find out whether you can drive on your Australian licence, but be aware that some car hire companies will only rent to customers who have an [international licence](#).

Driving in the USA

- › Vehicles drive on the right-hand side of the road.
- › All occupants must wear seatbelts.
- › Mobile phone use is not permitted while driving, unless with a hands-free device.
- › Children under six must have an appropriate child seat. Beyond that age, laws vary by state.
- › The blood alcohol limit is 0.08mg in most states, 0.05mg in some others.

- › At intersections with no traffic lights, vehicles give way on a first-come, first-served basis.
- › Right turns on red lights are generally permitted provided you give way to other vehicles and crossing pedestrians unless signed "No right turn on red".
- › Most multi-lane roads have marked median areas where U-turns are permitted. These can be used by motorists travelling in either direction.
- › School zones have reduced speed limits, as in Australia.
- › If a school bus stops and its lights begin flashing, all traffic travelling in both directions is required to stop while students enter or exit the bus safely.
- › If an ambulance, police car or fire truck approaches with its siren on, pull over to the side of the road and



stop the car until the emergency vehicle has passed.

- › If you are stopped by the police, DO NOT get out of your car. Wait for the officer to approach your window and keep your hands in plain sight.

Accommodation and tours

Tip: Have you booked accommodation for at least the first night of your trip?

Accommodation in the USA varies from cheap motels to five-star resorts. The cost is similar to here in Australia, if not a little cheaper, depending on the location and the exchange rate.

Most hotels, motels, resorts and bed and breakfasts are easily booked online through sites such as

wotif.com, hotels.com or bedandbreakfast.com.

Check reviews on tripadvisor.com before you book.

If you're looking for a homestay or apartment rental, airbnb.com is widely used in the United States.

Tip: Expect to pay more than the advertised price once sales tax and hotel tax has been added.

Tours can be booked through a travel agent or online through a major tour operator before you go (try intrepidtravel.com or contiki.com or look for recommended tours on tripadvisor.com). For the easiest option of all, consider a package deal from a travel agent such as [Flight Centre](http://FlightCentre.com.au), which includes flights, transport, accommodation and sometimes even meals.

Package tours or self-drive tours are a low-stress option for travellers who don't want to organise their flights, accommodation and on-the-ground transport separately. For deals, check the airline sites above, as well as viator.com, expedia.com, tripadvisor.com and travel agents. ■

